

semble que nous ne pouvons jamais estre
assez meprisez
selon nostre merite/ Like some delighted
water-fowl he
dives again and again into the depths of
nescience and uses
his wings to splash its dark waters with
gusto over his
shaking head.

And yet Montaigne was not really a
sceptic; on most
days, at least. What did he believe in?
Christianity?

What, indeed, is belief? It is quite false, I
think, to picture
him as a disguised Voltaire, sneering in his
sleeve. No

doubt, he might well have conformed
outwardly through

his life, merely to save it; he might have
made a Christian

death simply, as Gide suggests, for his
wife's sake; but

if an essay like that on Prayers, with its
casual allusions

to his own special fondness for the
Paternoster and for

the sign of the Cross, is all merely a cunning
piece of

stagecraft, then instead of the sincerest he
was the in-

sincerest of men. And why should he tell
us, unless it

were true, that he always receives the rites
of the Church

at the beginning of any attack of illness, to
set his mind at

rest? Sainte-Beuve has pictured him as a
demon or

enchanter leading the unsuspecting
Christian on and on

into the labyrinth of opinions by the light of
the lamp of

faith; then suddenly he blows it out and
through the

pathless darkness Ton n'entend plus qu'un
petit rire*.

So Port-Royal may have seen him; such, in
effect, for

some readers he may have been; but he

surely did not see
himself as this sort of 'Sphinx moqueur'. So
much the
worse for his head, perhaps; so much the
better for his
heart* Irony is fair enough; dissimulation
may be neces-
sary; but wanton hypocrisy is no part of the
Montaigne
we know. He tells us how astounded he was
by the con-
fession of an acquaintance that he had
continued all his
life to pretend beliefs he did not hold, in
order to keep
some position. Are we to think this too a
pretence?